

Almost a Night Swim

by Ltjg. Dan Fillion

"I had my hand on the emergency window release," said the crewman during the debrief of what was supposed to be a routine training flight. "I'd never been so scared in my life."

Truth is, we were all scared at that particular moment during the flight. We figured that in four seconds, we would be in the water. But what could have been a Class A mishap turned out to be a valuable learning experience for me (a nugget in the squadron), as well as for an experienced HAC and a veteran crewman.

It happened during a joint task force exercise. Our ship was assigned to be the orange forces, which meant we didn't have to play by the rules. In order to deceive the blue at night, someone came up with a witty idea during a pre-staging brief. We decided to rig the ship with a different lighting scheme, making the ship appear to be a merchant instead of a warship. Everyone agreed this was a good idea, even the guys in the air department. However, the configuration of the lighting wasn't delineated during the brief.

I was copilot on the dusk patrol bag. Flight quarters went down after sunset, and the HAC and I were getting accustomed to the dark, doing pre-flight checks. It was supposed to be

a starlit night, but a broken ceiling had moved in at 8,000 feet. It was one of those "dark" nights that I'd been hearing about. The flight-deck lighting was very dim, which allowed our night vision to develop without hindrance. By the time we were ready to lift, our cockpit lighting was low enough to be comfortable for the rest of the flight.

It was to be an EMCON launch. The LSO gave us green deck, and we lifted into a hover. "Gauges green, no caution lights, cleared to slide aft," I said to the HAC, who held steady at the HARS bar. The aircraft looked good, as we pedal-turned to the left 90 degrees and began to transition to forward flight. The HAC and I were both on the gauges as we came past the port-side superstructure of the ship. At that very moment, a blinding white light hit us both, coming from the port bridge wing. Our night vision went south—we were like two deer in headlights. I reached up to increase my instrument lights, when I heard the HAC over the ICS: "We're descending!"

The crewman, needless to say, was not happy and expressed his displeasure in so many words. My head snapped back to the radar altimeter as my left hand reached down to the collective. Power was already coming in. We'd gone from descent to climb fairly rapidly.

By the time we had climbed to 300 feet and called, "Ops normal," we all felt we had already

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Please send your questions, comments or recommendations to Mr. John Mahoney or to Capt. Darryl M. Faherty, Director Operational Risk Management, Mr. Mahoney's address is: Code 08, Naval Safety Center, 375 A St., Norfolk, VA 23511-4399. (USN) 444-3320; ext. 2310 (USN) 5643. E-mail: jmahoney@navsafetycenter.navy.mil

Write Capt. Faherty at OPMA2 Code 04-08K, 2000 Navy Pentagon, 3rd Fl., SE 8th, Washington DC 20350-2000. (USN) 614-6430, (USN) 224. E-mail: fahertyd@navsafetycenter.navy.mil



flown an entire sortie. The vertigo from the ship's "deceptive lighting" had caused us to descend to about 50 feet on takeoff over the water. After a short exchange of colorful phrases, our anger gradually gave way to relief. During our recovery and on subsequent night flights, we made sure the ship secured those side lights.

For me, this event was a real-life wake up call. Never take your eyes off the gauges during

takeoff. Don't let distractions keep you from verifying your climb. When you're four seconds away from a swim at night, crew coordination is critical.

Finally, taking off from the back of a ship at night is hard enough without vertigo-inducing surprises. One of the principles of ORM is that change is the mother of all risks. Change in the usual lighting configuration is a perfect example. 🦅

Ltjg. Fillion flies with HSL-47.



Photo-composite illustration by Allan Amen